

# CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

## Lewis Riley

**Key Quotes**  
 [hesitant] This is an unusual position for me. I directed some plays at university, and well, this is my first year out – (p. 7)  
 In a way, you're sort of testing yourself by coming here? (Julie to Lewis, p. 32)  
 I'm not going to let them down. (p. 70)  
 Without love the world wouldn't mean much. (p. 70)

Lewis is a version of Louis Nowra, but it is important not to confuse the two. Even if Lewis is grounded in reality, he is still a fictional character.

### Passivity

Lewis is the central character in *Cosi*, although for a long time he is very passive and therefore other characters sometimes overshadow him. Lewis is unsure about what exactly he is supposed to be doing in the asylum, and this seems to represent how he feels about his life generally. Rather than making decisions, he tends to try to please other people by agreeing to whatever they want him to do. Even his political beliefs appear to simply be based on those of Lucy and Nick. Similarly, later, when he makes his statement about love being important in the world, when he to have borrowed the line from somewhere – maybe from one of the patients or even from *Così Fan Tutte* – since his actions don't really seem to reflect this belief. He doesn't pursue his relationship with Lucy, and seems only briefly disappointed that a relationship with Julie is out of the question (p. 87).

Lewis' indecisiveness and lack of confidence are present in his very first line, 'don't know' (p. 1). Not long after this, Justin mistakes him for a patient in the asylum. This indicates how uncertain and hesitant Lewis' identity is: not only is he not sure of himself, but he does not communicate a confident persona to anyone else. In the first few pages, the stage directions refer to Lewis' 'apprehension' (p. 4), and instruct the actor to deliver his lines 'uncomfortably' (p. 4), 'uncertainly' (p. 5) and it also gives us a good indication of his confidence levels (low) and his capacity to act decisively and strongly (poor).

## Così

### Compassion

Lewis tries hard to be sensitive to the patients, never to judge them and not to destroy their dreams when he can help it. He genuinely wants this situation to work out for the best, even if he is not entirely confident about what the situation is, or even what 'the best' might be. He regularly tries to mediate the often volatile situations involving the patients, and to support them as much as possible. Early examples are when he tries to address Ruth's concerns about the cappuccinos, even when those concerns are contradictory and irrational (p. 10); when he tries to cheer Roy up by showing an interest in the opera, even though the production sounds impossible (p. 12); and when he decides to support the lie to Justin about who started the fire in the toilets (p. 22).

### Strength

For a while Lewis struggles through rehearsals, unsure of what he is doing, unsure how to keep all the patients happy at the same time. He is unable to stop Doug from lighting fires, Roy from creatively hijacking the whole project, or even Cherry from trying to force-feed him. The turning point is when Nick visits and upsets Henry. Lewis makes an active decision to support Henry and the rest of the patients instead of his rather insensitive friend Nick (pp. 49–50). When Henry threatens to leave, Lewis physically stands up to him, finally showing strength and leadership. This has a positive result when Henry agrees to stay, and even admits his fondness for Lewis. From this moment his dedication to the opera is clear, even when things get difficult. He later articulates this commitment to Lucy when, in the second act, she asks him to choose between the moratorium meeting and the opera rehearsal, effectively asking him to choose between her and them (pp. 69–70). Lewis chooses Mozart, the patients and love, over the war protest, Lucy and politics.

### Key Point

Although Lewis and Roy are in almost constant conflict, together they are the ones who see the opera through to its performance, motivating and supporting the patients in the town.

**Q** Do you think that Lewis has really grown and changed by the end of the play – how do you think he might behave now?

## Roy

## Key Quotes

He loves the theatre apparently. A great enthusiast when he gets going. He has his down periods like a lot of people, but he's your support, your natural energiser. (Justin to Lewis about Roy, p.3)

Without this opera having been composed there would be just a clanging, banging, a bedlam all around us. (p.13)

I am for the stars, Jerry, is that such a bad thing? (p.15)

I had a dream, Jerry. I would that was as far removed from this depressing asylum as possible. (p.63)

Roy is the driving force behind the institution's production of *Costi Fan Tutte*. The opera is his idea, his dream and his vision; his passion for it regularly pushes Lewis through seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Roy cares about the opera more than anything else, including the feelings of others. He is dismissive of people's concerns about being able to do the opera, and often snaps at the other patients when their behaviour doesn't fit in with his vision. He is impatient, passionate, and stubborn.

## Mood swings

Roy's behaviour seems to characterise bipolar disorder (once known as manic depression), with his moods fluctuating between manic (excitable, erratic, impulsive) and depressed. However, as with the other patients, he is never labelled in the text as suffering from a particular disorder. This encourages us to see Roy more holistically, not to judge him on his disorder but to see him as a character who happens to suffer from severe mood swings, and whose exuberance is sometimes a useful thing and sometimes a problem.

## The music of the spheres

Roy first explains what the opera really means to him at the end of the first scene. He describes how the beauty of the music is able to make sense of the world for him, and how it represents 'the harmony of the spheres', and he is confident that he can make the rest of the group understand this magic (p.13). This image of a celestial and magical harmony is repeated regularly, as he refers over and over to 'the music of the spheres' (p.30, p.35, p.63).

For Roy, this beautiful vision of the opera represents a childhood he wishes he had experienced. He describes this childhood to Lewis as

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one filled with high culture, elegance, music, joy and a lovely mother (pp.63-4). It isn't until later that Cherry tells Lewis (and therefore the audience) that Roy actually grew up 'in orphanages and being farmed out to foster parents' (p.76). Roy's imagined childhood, then, like his vision of the opera, is a way for him to escape the mundane and depressing real world, and create something more bearable and more beautiful in his mind.

## Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin

On meeting Lewis, Roy nicknames him 'Jerry', exclaiming 'we'll be like Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin' (p.3). While the nickname seems affectionate, and indeed Roy is initially complimentary and flattering, he gradually spends more and more time criticising 'Jerry'. He takes out his frustrations on Lewis, blaming him whenever the rehearsals don't live up to his dream. When Ruth struggles to grasp the concept of pretending, Roy tells Doug that Lewis 'couldn't direct a poofter to a man's dunny' (p.10). After Doug sets fire to the toilets, Roy says 'we'll get a new director then. Thank God!' (p.22). When Henry refuses to speak in the first rehearsal, Roy blames Lewis' directing abilities: 'couldn't direct traffic down a one way street' (p.28). And after Doug is sent back to the closed ward, yet again Roy takes it out on Lewis, muttering: 'couldn't direct a nymphomaniac to a stag night' (p.36). Despite all this criticism, Roy is often quick to praise Lewis, too, when he feels positive. For example, he praises Lewis for staying inside at lunch to look over the translation: 'you're like the best directors, a glutton for work' (p.16).

Roy's ambivalence (two contradictory feelings about one person or thing) towards Lewis is typical of his quick shifts in mood, and shows that Roy's reactions aren't always based directly on what is actually occurring around him, but perhaps on some other 'reality' that exists in his mind. This also applies to Roy's lively praise of Nick's directing abilities. Nick really has done nothing to deserve Roy's praise, but Roy is instantly enthusiastic, and says to Lewis 'he's brilliant, isn't he?' (p.43), and, moments later, 'brilliant! Everything is coming alive. Everything matches my vision' (p.45). Roy is so desperate to sustain his illusion of beauty and harmony that he latches on to any glimpse of success in the rehearsal room.

- Q** How deeply do you think Roy believes in his own fantasies – does he really believe the story he tells about his childhood, or is he aware that he is creating a fiction?

## Doug

What have I done now? (p. 7)  
Let's do a rock musical. A nude, tribal, let's make love not war, man, rock opera. (p. 15)

Don't blame me, blame my mother! (p. 23)  
This theatre would have burnt like a real beauty. [A beat.] My motto is to try and try again. (p. 85)

## Key Quotes

Doug is the most dangerous of the residents in the opera cast. He has a history of pyromania (but, as with the other characters, is never labelled in the text). He continues to try to set things on fire, first the toilets (pp. 21–2) and then the theatre itself (p. 34). He unnerves the meeker characters, like Ruth, but finds an equal sparring partner in Cherry, with whom he regularly exchanges insults. While he is crass, meddlesome and often rude and offensive, he tends not to bear much malice towards anyone. Even his slanging matches with Cherry are fairly affectionate. He likes to act tough, but when he escapes from the closed ward and comes back to the theatre, he is only joking when he says that he's come to kill Lewis for taking his role (p. 71). Instead, he seems to have come to check what's been happening with the opera in his absence, and he does choose to come to the opera performance at the end.

## Key Point

Doug is one of the characters whose character is least by his involvement in the opera. His behaviour is consistent throughout and he seems to take everything in his admitted, rather unstable, stride. As Lewis notes in his closing monologue, Doug, predictably, is suspected of burning down the theatre shortly after the opera took place.

- Q** How is Doug's pyromania a form of escapism and a way of dealing with reality, as is the behaviour of the other patients?

## Henry

The story, the old Henry. Part of this project is to bring out people like Henry. (p. 57)  
I ask Henry, you're a failure, as a human being and as a lawyer. Così offers you a chance to do something successful at least once in your dismal life. (p. 62)

## Key Quotes

Henry, an ex-lawyer, seems to suffer from some form of social phobia, which may be linked with his severe stutter. Henry barely speaks for the first half of the text, and has only four lines up until the end of the first act, when he breaks his silence in an angry and passionate outburst provoked by Nick's communist leanings. It is at this point that Henry finally overcomes his debilitating fear of, or at least reluctance towards, speaking. Once he begins, he is fuelled by his own anger and can hardly stop, and even his stutter partly disappears.

Henry's anger at Nick, and then at Lewis, springs from his respect for his own father, who fought in the Korean War. Henry feels that Nick and Lewis' support of the Viet Cong (America's, and therefore Australia's enemy) is traitorous behaviour, and shows a lack of respect for men like his father who went to war to protect Australia. Tied up with this anger is Henry's resentment of the way *Così Fan Tutte* portrays women. Again his reaction is very personal – he feels that the depiction of women as unfaithful is offensive to the memory of his mother, and the many women like her, who remained faithful to their soldier-partners.

Henry's anger gives him the physical strength to attack Nick in defence of his parents' honour (pp. 46–7), and then the emotional strength to admit that he does not want to hit Lewis, but in fact actually likes him (p. 49). After this climax for Henry in Act One, Scene Four, he rarely feels the need to speak again for the rest of the play, although when he does, he is clearly more at ease – for example, when he volunteers the personal information about his marriage (pp. 64–5). Similarly, he feels comfortable rehearsing the opera, and even sings along to the recorded music when Lewis says nobody needs to: 'I ffffeelt like it' (p. 57).

Although Henry dies soon after the opera, it is clear that he is one of the characters who benefited most from the experience; the opera actually did succeed in bringing Henry out, as Justin hoped it might.

- Q Why do you think Nowra chooses to write Henry's death into Lewis' closing monologue? What else do you think Henry might have gone on to do after the opera, and how would this have changed the message his character conveys?

## Julie

**KEY QUOTES**  
 'I like doing theatre, even though it's my first time... I like it because I'm doing something... Getting out of my ward's good, how I hate that ward.' (p.36)  
 'not to be on drugs, whatever, sort is like being in limbo for me. Drugs make me feel sort of living up.' (p.37)  
 'I need something stable in my life. I need my girlfriend.' (p.87)

Julie's parents had her committed to the asylum because of her substance abuse, but she resents being there and feels that the staff 'don't know how to deal with drug users' (p.32). For Julie, the opera makes her time in the asylum bearable. This is not just because she is interested in the opera itself, but also because she is clearly attracted to Lewis from the beginning, and Lewis returns the interest.

Julie and Lewis' relationship reaches its peak during the blackout in Act Two, when they kiss (p.68). They also share a quick kiss 'for good luck' before the performance (p.80), but it is the first kiss that is more significant: the stage directions describe it as 'passionate'. It is interrupted by the lights coming back on (p.68) and seen by the rest of the patients, which infuriates Cherry but seems not to bother anyone else.

Julie is articulate and enjoys talking to Lewis, and they have several discussions about love and fidelity. Although Doug, Roy and Cherry make regular reference to the obvious attraction between them, Julie and Lewis do not discuss the possibility of a relationship until after the opera, when they are saying their goodbyes. It is at this point that Julie reveals that she has a girlfriend outside the asylum, and that she intends to go back to her.

- Q Lewis argues that he is not cheating on Lucy, and that she is cheating on him (p.72). Do you think Lewis and Julie's relationship qualifies as infidelity (in that they both have partners outside the institution)?

## Costi

## Cherry

**KEY QUOTES**  
 'This is the best pain, isn't it? Not having to eat lunch in a ward. But in a theatre!'  
 (p.20)  
 'With someone like you, I could be true and faithful.' (to Lewis, p.34)  
 'Kiss him again and I'll break your fuckin' arm.' (to Julie, p.68)

Cherry, hot-headed and overly amorous, is preoccupied with food, and is emotionally volatile, making constant threats of violence, mostly against Doug or Julie. She develops a quick and firm affection for Lewis and does not recognise that her infatuation is unrequited. She is jealous of trying to feed Lewis sandwiches and to be close to him.

- Q How do you think Cherry has ended up in the institution?

## Zac

**KEY QUOTES**  
 'I'm prepared to play the pissy score for the whole opera, only if I do the overture my way, or else it's exit the pianist.' (p.30)  
 'I can't stand real things. If I could put up with reality I wouldn't be in here.' (p.62)

Zac, a musician, arrives into the narrative late (too late to be introduced by Justin) and leaves early (too soon for Lewis to farewell him), and in between, he is often barely present. He is usually heavily drugged, and rarely participates in discussions, with the exception of the scene in which he presents his set design and his poster.

## Ruth

**KEY QUOTES**  
 'I'm not going to sing a song that is not word perfect. You don't want me to make a fool of myself, do you?' (p.13)  
 'I can live with illusion as long as I know it's illusion...' (p.26)

Comedy is better when it's real.' (p.61)

Ruth's behaviour characterises a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, an anxiety disorder. She routinely seeks reassurance and needs detailed routines to feel comfortable. She is also...

in the play is one of coming to terms with the different kinds of 'truths' around her.

Ruth, like Henry, is one of the few characters who manages to benefit from her involvement in the opera. The turning point for Ruth is when she defends herself against criticism from Cherry, making a distinction between herself and her character. This amuses Lewis, and he enjoys teasing Ruth with the fact that she has, finally, begun to 'pretend' onstage. Although Ruth is reluctant to admit this, she has clearly made progress in reaching a point where she is able to admit it.

Ruth is described in Lewis' closing monologue as having successfully left the asylum; she is one of few characters to achieve this.

## Lucy

**Key quotes**  
 'She's into politics. She dates talk about love. She thinks it's icky ... She hates me doing an opera about love and fidelity while thousands of Vietnamese are being killed by American troops.' (Lewis, p.33)

'I have sex with him and sleep with you.' (to Lewis, p.71)

'Lucy and Nick? Well, they didn't last long as both were not into fidelity.' (Lewis, p.89)

Lucy is Lewis' girlfriend, although it is never very clear why: the play does not show us any affection or chemistry between the two of them. Lewis himself seems uncommitted to the relationship: when Doug asks if he plans to marry Lucy, Lewis says 'who knows?' (p.18), and when he kisses Julie (p.68, p.80) his behaviour supports this lack of commitment. Lucy doesn't show much faith in their relationship either. The bond between them has lost its spark (if there ever was one) and the couple's lives are drifting apart. It is no surprise to learn that Lucy is having an affair with Nick. When Lewis asks if she and Nick are having an affair, Lucy says bluntly: 'of course' (p.70).

Although Lucy's infidelity with Nick is not revealed until almost the end of the play (p.70), it is hinted at from the very beginning. Not only do Lucy and Nick leave the theatre together, abandoning Lewis (p.2), but it is also clear, even in this first scene, that Lucy and Nick are on a wavelength that does not include Lewis. Lucy and Nick share priorities – both are passionate about their active student politics – and they both lack interest in, or respect for, what Lewis is doing. Lucy's passion for politics mirrors Roy's passion for the opera.

Lucy only appears in two of the play's nine scenes, while Lewis is in every scene; this contributes to the impression that she and Lewis are drifting out of each other's lives.

**Q** In what ways is Lucy different from Roy? Which of these two characters influences Lewis more?

## Nick

**Key quotes**  
 'Mad actors are bad enough, but madmen ...' (p.1)  
 'My friend, Nick, is the one who knows all about theatre, only he's more interested in politics.' (Lewis, p.32)

'Women shouldn't come between mates ... It's only sex.' (p.77)

Nick is a close friend of Lewis, and lives with him and Lucy. But it is clear that Nick, like Lucy, no longer shares much with Lewis. Their priorities and beliefs no longer seem compatible and, in two out of the three scenes in which Nick appears, he and Lewis fight: first verbally (in Act One) and then physically (in Act Two).

Nick, believes, as does Lucy, that there are social and political issues much more important and valid than love and fidelity, and he thinks Lewis is wasting his time in the asylum. He doesn't appreciate the meaning that the opera has for the patients, and sees both the patients' attitudes and the opera itself as 'right wing crap' (p.47). Nick has a low tolerance for the quirks of the patients, and is insensitive towards them, making a joke about their situation and singing a politically incorrect song about a 'funny farm' (p.41, p.77). (This is an actual song, a popular novelty song from the mid 1960s by an artist called Jerry Samuels. It was controversial at the time.)

**Q** What do Lewis and Nick have in common?

## THEMES, IDEAS & VALUES

### Love and fidelity

#### KEY QUOTES

- 'Love is not so important nowadays' ... 'What planet are you from?' (Lewis and Roy, p.10)
- 'You believe in free love and that sort of thing?' ... 'Free love is a hard concept to define.' (Doug and Lewis, p.118)
- 'Love is the last gasp of bourgeois romanticism', she says. (Lewis about Lucy, p.33)
- 'I've always thought that (I) was being foolish and stupid ... Love is hallucinating without drugs.' (Julie, p.61)
- 'Love is what you feel when you don't have enough emotion left to hate.' (Roy, p.61)
- 'Without love the world wouldn't mean much.' (Lewis, p.70)

Love is not just the central theme of the opera but also the central theme of *Così*. The particular aspect of love that is the focus of both musical and play is fidelity: the notion of faithfulness, commitment and loyalty.

The play explores many aspects of the theme of love and fidelity, and the characters present slightly different perspectives, by giving us opinions on what love is; whether fidelity is important or even possible; and what love actually means to them. Some of the characters are firm about their positions from start to finish, and others change their mind or develop differing perspectives along the way. Not only each character, but also each scene can offer a new interpretation of this theme. In this way, Nowra's play considers the ideas of love and fidelity, without necessarily offering definitive opinions. Instead, *Così* presents a variety of social values and perspectives associated with love and fidelity, some of which are discussed below.

#### Love is an indulgence

Lucy and Nick are the characters who most strongly endorse this idea. They both believe that other social and political issues are much more important than love. Lucy's speech to Lewis in Act Two, Scene Two explains her justification for this: 'after bread, a shelter, equality, health, procreation, money comes maybe love. Do you think the starving

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masses give a fuck about love?' (p.70). Nick, too, espouses this view: 'only mad people in this day and age would do a work about love and infidelity' (p.41). On the night of the performance of *Così Fan Tutte*, Nick explains to Lewis why he and Lucy would prefer to be out celebrating the moratorium than supporting their friend at his production. Nick says, 'you don't understand, Lewis – today Australia was changed forever. She doesn't want to see an opera about a few upper class twits' (p.76).

In Nick and Lucy's belief system, fighting for their political ideals involves struggling to improve the quality of life for socially disadvantaged or politically oppressed peoples. This is their primary motivation, and it certainly means more to them than anything as frivolous as love. Although they are having a relationship, it seems to have more to do with shared politics and sex than it does with love. When she admits her affair to Lewis, Lucy says 'it's only a fling. It doesn't mean anything ... I have sex with him and sleep with you' (p.71), implying that sex is somehow separate from love, and that faithfulness doesn't really matter – particularly when it comes to physical sex. Nick, too, says 'it's only sex' when he talks about the affair, implying that faithfulness is not important to him either (p.77). Lewis confirms this in his closing monologue when he says that neither Nick nor Lucy cared about fidelity (p.89). The implication, based on what we have already seen of their characters, is that social welfare and basic human rights are the values Nick and Lucy support, rather than individual emotional fulfilment.

#### KEY POINT

Although the play, through Lucy and Nick, strongly presents an argument for the fact that love should be secondary to basic human needs, at the same time it supports the notion that love is a universal experience to which we can all relate: otherwise, why write a play which is underpinned by a debate about the importance of love?

Lewis, at the beginning of the play, shares Nick and Lucy's political beliefs. When Roy first introduces the idea of doing *Così Fan Tutte*, Lewis objects on the grounds that an opera about fidelity is not really relevant in a society and an era where war is impacting on millions of lives (p.10). Lewis' objection represents the idea that love is an indulgence available only to those who enjoy the privilege of a stable social existence. This idea, in turn, endorses the value of universal human rights.



As the play progresses, however, Lewis begins to shift his perspective to include the importance of love. This is not to say that the value of human rights is ever contested in the play, but rather that Lewis comes to see love as something that is always important, not just something which can only have meaning when every other practical aspect of life is fulfilled (as Lucy suggests). Instead, through his experiences with the patients and how they relate to the themes of the opera, Lewis gradually conceives of love as something that underlies all else: 'without love the world wouldn't mean much' (p.70).

### Free love

The concept of 'free love' is one that *Così* explores in passing. Free love is a philosophy of individuals' rights to freedom in how they choose to engage in romantic relationships, as opposed to relationships that are regulated by convention or imposed by society. The term has also become something of a cliché in the context of the social revolution of the 1970s, and in *Così* Doug seems to hold a fairly simplistic view of free love as meaning no more than the freedom to be promiscuous and unfaithful.

By making Doug the character most preoccupied with it, Nowra portrays the notion of free love in a fairly negative way: Doug is the most dangerous of the patients, and also one of those who provides the most comedy (through his blunt lines and his lack of inhibitions). Doug also generally refers to free love in a way that is potentially offensive, because he is challenging Lewis' relationship with Lucy and Lewis' belief that Lucy is faithful. He even spreads it around the asylum that Lewis and Lucy are into free love, when, as Lewis puts it, the fact is that Lucy is 'not into marriage' (p.33), which is not exactly the same thing.

Nick is the other character to bring up the issue of free love – his behaviour (in having the affair with Lucy, and also in the way that he talks about the affair) echoes what Doug means when he talks about 'free love'. Even when Nick speaks of the opera, he describes it as a story about 'love and infidelity' (p.41) rather than love and *fidelity*, which is how others see it. Fidelity just doesn't mean anything to Nick, and he is much more likely to believe in free love, although he never really addresses it in the text except to say to Lewis, 'Lucy's not possessive about you, I'm not possessive about her. What's the fuss?' (p.76). Nick is a character who

*Both characters to embrace 'free love' but not liked by audience initially*

is not terribly likeable to an audience; his lack of sensitivity towards the patients and his lack of real support for Lewis make us less inclined to feel empathy for him. In aligning Doug and Nick with the idea of free love, the play encourages us not to endorse free love, as we are encouraged not to sanction other aspects of these characters' behaviour.

**Q** Although Lewis is the central character, and one with whom we are encouraged to empathise, he is unfaithful to Lucy when he kisses Julie. How do we account for this behaviour, which is exactly what we are invited to condemn when it involves Nick and Lucy?

### Love is like ...

Each character has their own way of viewing love, and *Così Fan Tutte* gives them a reason to discuss love. The things that they say about love give us some insight into their prior experiences with love, and also into their experiences of life in general. For example, when Lewis says 'without love the world wouldn't mean much' (p.70), he indicates that although his current relationship with Lucy is failing, and although his attraction to Julie can never really be pursued, he still believes love is a vital aspect of human life. This statement of his is fairly broad, and not really supported by detail, but it shows that he believes deeply and firmly in love. Here are some examples of other characters' statements about love:

- Cherry, about *Così Fan Tutte*: it 'is just another thing about the battle of the sexes' (p.11), and 'most women fight hard to keep men out of their pants' (p.61).
- Nick, about the women's characters in *Così Fan Tutte*: 'you want to remain true to your lovers. It's an old fashioned concept ...' (p.43).
- Henry: 'whether women can remain true is a titttagedy' (p.49).
- Julie, about love: 'it's about being on the edge and I like being on the edge' (p.61).
- Roy: 'love is what you feel when you don't have enough emotion left to hate ... hate is a much more pure emotion ... you have enemies for life, but never lovers' (p.61).

**Q** What does each statement above tell us about the characters and their experiences of love? For example, Cherry's lines suggest that her experiences of love have been fraught with conflict. Her

unrequited love for Lewis might be a way of experiencing love without conflict, as there is no real relationship.

## Madness and mental health

### KEY QUOTES

... a madman is someone who arrives at a fancy, dress party dressed in the Emperor's new clothes. (p. 7)

'Do you think they'll get the idea that the toy soldiers symbolise real soldiers? ... You're dealing with a mad audience, you know. (p. 57)

'It's not divine madness like some people think, there's no such thing as divine madness, madness is just madness.' (p. 61)

*Così* proposes the idea that 'madness' is not always a simple psychological or psychiatric diagnosis, but is sometimes a matter of perspective or judgement. Justin's comment about the Emperor's new clothes could be just a euphemism for naked (the reference comes from a Hans Christian Andersen fairytale about an Emperor who is tricked into believing he is wearing an invisible cloak, when actually he is naked). However, it seems more likely that Justin is describing someone whose behaviour follows a logic of its own but might not appear rational from the outside. In the fairytale, the Emperor believes he is wearing clothes, but everyone else can see he is not. According to Justin's comment, then, 'madness' might be simply behaviour that doesn't necessarily make sense to others, or an interpretation of the world that does not match up with the most common perception.

This definition of madness as subjective is supported by the play's refusal to define the psychological or psychiatric conditions of any of the patients in the institution. Instead, they are presented as people who indulge in extremes of 'normal' behaviour. This illustrates the idea that human behaviour is a spectrum, and that mental stability is not a black-and-white issue. The text endorses a holistic view of human behaviour rather than an attitude of diagnostics and labelling.

Contrastingly, Julie's observation critiques a romantic perception of 'divine madness'. Julie reminds us that madness is not a desirable artistic or philosophical state – it is simply madness. This balances the text's overwhelming support for a non-judgemental view of 'madness'.

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## Illusion and reality

### KEY QUOTES

'I can live with illusion as long as I know it's illusion ...' (p. 26)

'(Not-)stage, no one will know the difference and they'll think you've got hundreds backstage.' (p. 45)

'It could put up with reality I wouldn't be in here.' (p. 62)

The question of what is real and what is an illusion (and whether there is really a difference) underlies *Così*. There are a number of ways the theme of illusion and reality is explored – some very explicit, and others more hidden.

### 'Did they have instant coffee in Mozart's day?'

Ruth's line above (p. 10) characterises her preoccupation with delineating illusion from reality. For Ruth, the process of the opera rehearsals is a process of discovering the concept of 'pretend', and of navigating the uncertain space between what is 'real', what is 'natural' and what is an 'illusion'. Ruth is fixated on tangible details, and she worries about things like having real coffee in the opera, and exactly how many steps to take across the stage. When Lewis tells her simply 'to make it natural' (p. 29), Ruth is distressed by the notion, and is desperate to differentiate between 'real' and 'natural' – are they the same thing, or not? She is also concerned with issues that are more philosophical, such as whether 'the audience thinks it's real coffee' (p. 26). It is important to her to distinguish between real and pretend, and to keep the two separate. It isn't until Act Two that she begins to enjoy the blurred space between real and pretend, and to appreciate the process of rehearsing and creating a new reality with the opera: 'the more real it is, the more real it is' (p. 60).

### Theatre as illusion

The theme of reality and illusion is embedded in the play's narrative: the rehearsal and performance of the opera. Theatre is, in a sense, an ultimate illusion, creating characters and lives and inviting an audience to participate in the 'realisation' of this illusion. Not only is *Così* itself a play, but it is also a play about a play (or an opera) – it is a play about the creation of illusion. Together the patients and Lewis engage in the collective building of an illusory world, the world of *Così Fan Tutte*.



The play endorses the view that imagination can be liberating and empowering. As Justin says, the intention of Lewis working with the patients in the theatre is to 'bring them out of their shells' (p.6), and one way to do this is to allow them to create their own reality where normal restrictions do not apply: this new reality is the opera.

While the opera provides an escape for the patients, it is still closely linked to their lives. Each of the characters makes a personal connection with the content of the opera: for example, Henry's comparison of Guglielmo and Ferrando's infidelity with his own father's loyalty (p.48). Cherry, by introducing the shock treatment equipment, brings the patients' own lives into the world of the opera, blending their own realities with the illusion of the theatre.

The play-within-a-play aspect of *Così* is a reminder to the audience that we are watching an illusion, a representation of reality. The questions that the patients confront in rehearsing *Così Fan Tutte* remind us that the performers of *Così* might have faced similar questions: they may have been forced to consider their own beliefs and values about love, for example. This, in turn, reminds us, the audience, to consider our own beliefs and values, comparing them with those of the characters in *Così* and the characters in *Così Fan Tutte*. Nowra emphasises the constructed reality of the theatre in order to encourage his audience to examine their own reality.

### Madness as illusion

One of the reasons that rehearsing a performance makes some sense to the patients (even though most of them have never been involved in theatre before) is that they are all familiar with the notion of creating new realities for themselves. The residents of the asylum each have ways of altering their own realities, or constructing new ones that are more bearable – and these strategies tend to reflect the behaviours that have landed the patients in the institution. As Zac notes, 'if I could put up with reality I wouldn't be in here' (p.62), and this is true for most of the patients. The characters each have their own illusion, their own escape from the everyday world. Their collective existence in the institution is another layer of illusion – their 'madness' gives them an escape for as long as they need it.

### Reality as illusion

Taken together, these elements in the play suggest that reality itself is a kind of illusion: as Ruth posits, 'an illusion of reality. A real illusion in other words?' (p.26). The value this endorses is that experience is subjective.

## The power of music

### Key quote

'There's music, of course' (p.9)  
 'This theatre could have been ringing with the music of the spheres, instead of that, a dreadful silence has descended upon us.' (p.35)  
 'No one cares who wrote the words. Why do you think an opera has music – so no one will have to pay attention to the words?' (p.63)

Music is a central element of *Così*, not least because the play is about the rehearsal of an opera. While we only see one scene from the opera (in Act Two, Scene Four), the notion of music is present throughout the play, and the play as a whole endorses the belief that music has therapeutic powers.

Roy is the patient who most strongly embodies this value, as his longstanding 'dream' of producing *Così Fan Tutte* appears to be one of the few things that gets him through his depressing daily existence in the asylum. The opera is associated with happy childhood memories, whether these are real or imagined: Roy says that his mother played the music for him 'over and over' (p.11). It is not just the theatrical illusion of *Così Fan Tutte* that gives Roy's life meaning, but the music particularly; as he says to Lewis, 'the music of this opera keeps the world in harmony' (p.13). Lewis doesn't think they can do the opera because the music itself is too much of a challenge, but Roy wilfully misinterprets this:

Straight to the crux of the problem again! I tell you what, we rehearse it like a proper play ... then, as we learn the songs, we incorporate them into the stage business we have learnt. (p.16)

For Roy, the music is vital. Later in the play, after the opera has encountered various challenges (such as the loss of Doug), Lewis admits to Roy that they 'just won't have time to learn the music' (p.61), and Roy is completely disheartened: 'music is what love between humans should

be. And we've thrown out the music from this opera' (p.61). Music for Roy represents the most idealistic of emotions – love. As Roy reminds us, 'Mozart is about love, not madness' (p.59). A world without music for Roy is a world hardly worth living in. The positive benefits music offers Roy's life are an example of how *Così* presents the idea that music has therapeutic powers.

Other characters, too, help the play endorse this view, most notably Zac, who is comatose much of the time but really comes alive when he can offer a musical contribution. For example, he becomes greatly excited when he brings in his old, battered accordion, and offers to contribute some Wagner to the opera (p.30). While he doesn't find Mozart terribly empowering, for Zac, Wagner has therapeutic power, motivating and exciting him beyond his usual drugged-out state. Wagner's music also eventually gets Zac out of the asylum, as Lewis notes in his closing monologue (p.89). Music, then, for Zac as well as Roy, has the power to motivate and energise.

There are other passing references to the positive benefits of music. For example, Julie asks to borrow Lewis' transistor because she 'wouldn't mind listening to some music' (p.21). When the stress or mundaneness of the asylum become overwhelming, many of the characters turn to music. Ruth can sing and memorises a song for the auditions, and Roy even claims to have heard Henry, who barely speaks, 'humming ... he's a natural' (p.12).

## Politics and empowerment: the value of theatre

See, I'm happy coming to this burnt-out theatre. (Julie, p.36).  
(He's doing a play, that's relevant and he's doing something about the war in Vietnam.) (Lucy, about Nick, p.70).

### Key Quotes

There is a tension in *Così* between the political and social values of theatre. This is most clearly presented through the differences between Lewis and Nick's priorities. Although Nick is a director too, he gives his political activities priority. The goals he strives towards in his political activities – to make people 'want the war to end ... want changes in our society ... want to overthrow the establishment' (p.17) – are the same goals

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he hopes to achieve with his theatre productions. As Lucy notes, what is important about theatre is how to make it 'meaningful and intelligent, like Brecht does' (p.70). Nick refers proudly to his own productions of Brecht's works (p.41) and, as Lewis observes, 'says politics is the real theatre' (p.32). This indicates that he values theatre for its political rather than its artistic significance.

Lewis, on the other hand, once he begins to work with the patients, approaches theatre on the levels of entertainment, illusion, and the value it can bring to the performers' lives. His work is a form of drama therapy: the use of the dramatic arts to help individuals or groups work through problems, increase self-confidence and develop or improve personal and social skills. Lewis also values theatre for its transformative powers, then, but in a more domestic sense than Nick.

Nick and Lucy scorn Lewis for his involvement with the asylum and with *Così Fan Tutte* on the grounds that what he is doing is less important than their large-scale, public efforts to implement social change. But they fail to acknowledge that Lewis is also working towards social change, merely in a smaller, more local context. While Nick and Lucy rehearse Brecht's *Galileo* and engage in protests against the Vietnam War, Lewis is fighting for his own changes through *Così Fan Tutte*: he is trying to bring change to the patients' lives and to give them confidence and the power to take charge of their own realities. Although Lewis is never completely successful (as evidenced by the mixed outcomes he reports for the patients in his closing monologue), the play presents the view that theatre has at least as much value in the context of personal empowerment as it does on a political level.

## DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

Different interpretations arise from different responses to a text. These responses can be published in newspapers, journals and books by critics and reviewers, or they can be expressed in discussions among readers in the media, classrooms, book groups and so on. A production of a play is also an interpretation of the text (the script). While there is no single correct reading or interpretation of a text, it is important to understand that an interpretation is more than an 'opinion' – it is the justification of a point of view on the text. To present an interpretation of the text based on your point of view you must use a logical argument and support it with relevant evidence from the text.

## Productions and reviews

*Così* is widely acknowledged as one of Nowra's most successful plays. It remains popular with audiences 17 years after its first production, as evidenced by its extensive republication as a script (the 1994 Currency Press edition has been reprinted at least once every year), and by its regular performances both within and beyond Australia. As Veronica Kelly notes in her book about Nowra and his work, *Così* is 'a favourite with performers, directors and audiences' (Kelly 1998, p.43).

After its first production at Belvoir Street in 1992, reviews of the play were largely positive. Angela Bennie described *Così* as 'hilarious' and 'strong', and discussed the characterisation in detail, especially concentrating on the performances themselves, but referencing their basis in the script. Although Bennie criticised the script for being over length, this was obviously addressed in the later revision (in 1994), when the domestic scenes outside the asylum were removed from the script.

Reviews of more recent productions tend to focus on the theatrical interpretation and therefore to concentrate on performances and directorial choices – response to the text itself is often limited to a positive acknowledgment of Nowra's original script. This allows reviewers to discuss the particular production's interpretation of the script, analysing how the company explores and presents Nowra's themes of love, madness and illusion. Reviews tend to concentrate on the hilarity of

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the productions, and on how the sensitive issue of mental illness is tackled. International reviews often comment on the use of common Australianisms in the language of the play – an aspect that tends to be ignored in Australian productions as the language habits of the characters are so familiar as to escape notice.

Natalie Bennett's review of a recent production of *Così* in London mentions that a male actor played Ruth as a transvestite. This 'interpretation' of the original script takes extensive liberties, yet seems a valid interpretation. Consider, for example, the extra layer of significance regarding Ruth's obsession with reality and illusion. If she were a male living as a female, this would be one interesting way of exploring her thoughts about what is real and what is not.

## Casting

The play is written to accommodate doubling in the cast (one actor playing multiple parts). Specifically, a single actor can play Justin, Nick and Zac, as these characters are never on stage together; and a single character can play Lucy and Julie. The original Company B production cast the show in this way. Often it is more economical for a professional company to cast fewer actors, especially when some roles are very small, like the role of Justin. On the other hand, amateur productions often want to give experience to as many actors as possible, so they may choose to cast one actor for each role.

The doubling of Lucy and Julie is particularly interesting. If a single actor is playing both of these roles, it will encourage an audience to draw very distinct parallels between the characters. Lewis is attracted to both of them, and both women are engaged in unfaithful behaviour (as is Lewis). With these characters played by one actor, there is an implication that perhaps Lewis is attracted to the same things in both of them and/or that they are very similar people. It also raises interesting questions: are we less inclined to judge Lewis' infidelity because on some level (certainly within the illusional reality of the theatre), Lucy and Julie are almost the same person?

The issues raised by this casting are complex, and should not be misread as changing the meaning of the play. However, it is worth considering how this might make an impact on an audience.

## Film interpretation

One widely available 'interpretation' of *Così* is the 1996 film version. While Nowra's screenplay does differ in several important ways from his stage play, the film may still be considered an interpretation of the play, as it presents essentially the same narrative, choosing to highlight some aspects and themes over others – just as a stage production might.

In Nowra's preface to the published film script, he describes his negotiations with the film company executives and creative team as he worked on the drafts of the screenplay. Many changes were small details (such as phrasing), but three were particularly significant. The first is the shift of setting, from the 1970s to the 1990s, removing the Vietnam War story and the broader political context. In the film, this is replaced by the more intimate 'politics' of Lewis' own life. The second important change regards Lewis' relationships with Lucy and with Julie. Miramax was reluctant for Lewis and Lucy to split up, preferring that the film have a happy ending, and they were also uncomfortable about Lewis and Julie's kisses. Some changes were made for the American but not the Australian print of the film – for example, in the American version Lewis and Lucy stay together (Kelly 1998, p.54). The final important change is to the ending: the published screenplay concludes with a closing voiceover from Lewis which is more or less the same as in the stage play monologue. However, this was cut from the film, which ends after the opera, thus remaining more optimistic and 'comic'.

The film interpretation, in removing the Vietnam War storyline, shifts the emphasis of *Così* to one of its other themes: love. The differences between Nick and Lewis are no longer about politics, but about how they each perceive the narrative of *Così Fan Tutte*, and about how they each relate to Lucy. This draws the focus more strongly to the idea of infidelity, and even though Lucy doesn't admit to sleeping with Nick in the film version, the issue of love and fidelity is prominent.

The other notable choice in the film interpretation of *Così* is to set many scenes outside the theatre; some in Lewis and Lucy's house, and many in daylight in the 'outside world'. This decision to expand the action beyond the theatre breaks down the boundary between the 'mad' world of the asylum and the 'normal' world of the outside. This is a notion that

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is already endorsed by the stage play, but the film interpretation makes it even more explicit. This boundary is blurred in many other ways by the film: for example, Doug visits Lewis' house, representing the fact that 'madness' is not simply contained within the theatre but encroaches on the 'normal' world too. Similarly, Lewis spends a night in the asylum when Doug convinces the orderlies that it is Lewis and not he who is the patient.

## Two possible interpretations

The following interpretations demonstrate how the same observations can be used to support a positive or a negative evaluation of the text, as long as this judgement is supported with evidence from that text.

### Reading 1

**In *Così*, Louis Nowra makes fun of mental illness, inappropriately exploiting 'mad' people's suffering for his own comic purposes.**

*Così* is a play which draws its comedy from the portrayal of damaged people who suffer from a variety of conditions, although these conditions are never described or analysed: instead they are generalised and manipulated for comic purposes. For example, Cherry's preoccupation with food (suggesting a dysfunctional relationship with eating) is only ever acknowledged by her attempts to force-feed Lewis, or by Doug's insults about her weight. Similarly, while Ruth appears to suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder, the implications are never addressed, and her obsession is always grounds for comedy, such as when she struggles with how many steps to take on stage (pp.29–30). There is no evidence in the text of any support for the patients' conditions; instead, they laugh at each other's quirks and unusual behaviours. This encourages the audience to laugh at them too, and to dismiss any concerns they may have about the seriousness of these particular mental illnesses.

Similarly, we are encouraged to laugh at those patients whose behaviour is dangerous to others: particularly Doug. When Justin introduces Doug to Lewis, he makes a light-hearted joke about the fact that Doug should be on medication, but that Lewis should watch out because Doug is 'a bit cheeky the way he won't take it sometimes' (p.5). Justin doesn't equip Lewis with any knowledge, skills or resources.

but instead cheerfully abandons him to negotiate the dangers on his own. The script makes light of Doug's history of pyromania, with the other patients constantly telling him to 'go burn a cat', referring to the incident which resulted in Doug's admission to the asylum.

Finally, the character of Nick represents the script's ultimate insult to mental illness; he jokes about madness, comparing madmen to actors (p.1), and on several occasions he sings the bizarre and provocative song about the funny farm. While Lewis objects to Nick's behaviour, he never justifies his objections with any information that would educate Nick or an audience about how to sensitively approach mental illness.

Taken as a whole, *Così* presents the view that it is acceptable to laugh at mental illness, rather than attempting to explain the conditions or search for more sensitive ways of relating to those who are different.

## Reading 2

**Louis Nowra's play *Così* is a comedy that sensitively and respectfully portrays the experiences of patients in a mental institution.**

Although *Così* is a very funny and entertaining play set in an asylum, we are never encouraged to laugh at the patients themselves. Rather, the script endorses a view of 'madness' that suggests human behaviour forms a continuum and that all humans fall somewhere between 'mad' and 'normal'. In this play, much of the behaviour (particularly, but not exclusively, from the patients) leans strongly towards the 'mad' end of the scale, but this is rarely used as evidence that these people are any less human, valuable or functional. Instead, the various behaviours of the patients are portrayed as extreme examples of how any human being might act, and this is where the comedy originates. These characters are not so different from ourselves that we find it impossible to identify with them, but they take things to such extremes that it becomes comical.

While each patient displays traits that remind us of familiar mental illnesses or conditions (such as pyromania, nymphomania, or bipolar disorder), these traits are presented simply as elements of the characters' personalities rather than as symptoms of disorders. For example, Roy's behaviour, which could be described as bipolar disorder, is simply who Roy is: he finds himself overwhelmingly excited at some times,

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but drained and demoralised at other times. When he is excited, his enthusiasm is contagious and he tries to inspire the others to 'aim for the stars!' (p.15); when he is depressed, he says simply 'I'm down' (p.63). We can all recognise these basic human emotions, and in resisting labelling Roy with a particular mental condition, Nowra helps audiences to relate to, rather than judge, the characters.

By breaking down the familiar distinctions between 'mad' and 'normal', Nowra allows us to join Lewis on a journey as he deals with the patients' behaviour, and with his own prejudices and reactions to this behaviour. The comedy, then, becomes an empathetic comedy where we are encouraged to laugh with the characters at the ridiculousness of the situations they find themselves in, rather than at their disabilities or their position in the institution.

*Così* warmly portrays the challenges faced by this group of patients in the same way that it would illustrate the challenges faced by a group of people outside the asylum. The individual behaviour of patients and the relationships between them contribute to the situation comedy that treats its underlying serious subject matter with respect.

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

This section focuses on your own analytical writing on the text, and gives you strategies for producing high-quality responses in your coursework and exam essays.

### Essay writing – an overview

An essay is a formal and serious piece of writing that presents your point of view on the text, usually in response to a given essay topic. Your 'point of view' in an essay is your interpretation of the meaning of the text's language, structure, characters, situations and events, supported by detailed analysis of textual evidence.

#### Analysée – don't summarise

In your essays it is important to avoid simply summarising what happens in a text:

- A **summary** is a description or paraphrase (retelling in different words) of the characters and events. For example: 'Macbeth has a horrifying vision of a dagger dripping with blood before he goes to murder King Duncan'.
- An **analysis** is an explanation of the real meaning or significance that lies 'beneath' the text's words (and images, for a film). For example: 'Macbeth's vision of a bloody dagger shows how deeply uneasy he is about the violent act he is contemplating – as well as his sense that supernatural forces are impelling him to act'.

A limited amount of summary is sometimes necessary to let your reader know which part of the text you wish to discuss. However, always keep this to a minimum and follow it immediately with your analysis (explanation) of what this part of the text is really telling us.

#### Plan your essay

Carefully plan your essay so that you have a clear idea of what you are going to say. The plan ensures that your ideas flow logically, that your argument remains consistent and that you stay on the topic. An essay

#### Essay

plan should be a list of **brief dot points** – no more than half a page. It includes:

- your central argument or main contention – a concise statement (usually in a single sentence) of your overall response to the topic. See 'Analysing a sample topic' for guidelines on how to formulate a main contention.
- three or four dot points for each paragraph indicating the main idea and evidence/examples from the text. Note that in your essay you will need to *expand* on these points and *analyse* the evidence.

#### Structure your essay

An essay is a complete, self-contained piece of writing. It has a clear beginning (the introduction), middle (several body paragraphs) and end (the last paragraph or conclusion). It must also have a central argument that runs throughout, linking each paragraph to form a coherent whole.

See examples of introductions and conclusions in the 'Analysing a sample topic' and 'Sample answer' sections.

**The introduction establishes your overall response to the topic.** It includes your main contention and outlines the main evidence you will refer to in the course of the essay. Write your introduction *after* you have done a plan and *before* you write the rest of the essay.

**The body paragraphs argue your case** – they present evidence from the text and explain how this evidence supports your argument. Each body paragraph needs:

- a strong **topic sentence** (usually the first sentence) that states the main point being made in the paragraph
- **evidence** from the text, including some brief quotations
- **analysis** of the textual evidence explaining its significance and **explanation** of how it supports your argument
- **links back to the topic** in one or more statements, usually towards the end of the paragraph.

Connect the body paragraphs so that your discussion flows smoothly. Use some linking words and phrases like 'similarly' and 'on the other hand', though don't start every paragraph like this. Another strategy is to use a significant word from the last sentence of one paragraph in the first sentence of the next.



Use key terms from the topic – or similes for them – throughout, so the relevance of your discussion to the topic is always clear.

**The conclusion ties everything together and finishes the essay.** It includes strong statements that emphasise your central argument and provide a clear response to the topic.

Avoid simply restating the points made earlier in the essay – this will end on a very flat note and imply that you have run out of ideas and vocabulary. The conclusion is meant to be a logical extension of what you have written, not just a repetition or summary of it. Writing an effective conclusion can be a challenge. Try using these tips:

- Start by linking back to the final sentence of the second-last paragraph – this helps your writing to ‘flow’, rather than just leaping back to your main contention straight away.
- Use similes and expressions with equivalent meanings to vary your vocabulary. This allows you to reinforce your line of argument without being repetitive.
- When planning your essay, think of one or two broad statements or observations about the text’s wider meaning. These should be related to the topic and your overall argument. Keep them for the conclusion, since they will give you something ‘new’ to say but still follow logically from your discussion. The introduction will be focused on the topic, but the conclusion can present a wider view of the text.

## Essay topics

- 1 Lucy says to Lewis, “working with these people has changed you”. Has Lewis really changed at the end of the play?
- 2 ‘Each patient in *Così* has their own way of escaping reality.’ Discuss.
- 3 Justin explains that the point of the play is to engage the patients and “bring them out of their shells”. Do you think *Così Fan Tutte* achieves this?
- 4 ‘*Così* shows that love is a universal human experience.’ Discuss.
- 5 ‘In the process of rehearsing *Così Fan Tutte*, Lewis learns as much from the patients as they learn from him.’ Discuss.

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- 6 ‘*Così* draws parallels between madness and creativity.’ Discuss.
- 7 Ruth claims, “comedy is better when it’s real”. How does this statement apply to *Così* itself?
- 8 ‘*Così* demonstrates how music can change lives.’ Discuss.
- 9 Lewis tells Roy, “no one is a success or failure”. How much does the play support or refute this statement?
- 10 ‘*Così* is a play about the triumph of fantasy over reality.’ Discuss.

## Vocabulary for writing on *Così*

**Asylum:** with few exceptions, this is how the characters refer to the mental institution where the play is set. While ‘asylum’ is a somewhat outdated phrase (reflecting the era of the play), and carries unsettling echoes of the politically incorrect phrase ‘lunatic asylum’, it also carries the connotations of refuge and protection: many of the characters in *Così* are seeking a refuge in the asylum from the ‘real’ world.

**Black comedy:** a theatrical form that juxtaposes morbid or sensitive issues with comedy.

**Mad, madness:** while it is difficult to discuss the play without these terms, Nowra is careful never to label the characters as mad (although sometimes other characters do: note that they are usually doing this in a provoking way). Certainly, other words used by characters as insults (such as ‘loony’) should not be used unless directly citing the text.

**Naturalism:** originally a theatrical movement in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, and with quite specific guidelines (covering content as well as style), naturalism has come to be used as a general term to describe a realistic style of writing/performance.

**Opera buffa:** Italian term for the style of comic opera of which *Così Fan Tutte* is an example.

**Patient:** this is the term Nowra uses in the play to refer to the residents in the institution, rather than ‘inmate’ or other terms that might imply a more distressing incarceration.

**Socialism:** a liberal political system that values social justice and equality among citizens. Lucy and Nick’s political leanings tend towards socialism.

## Analysing a sample topic

Lucy says to Lewis, 'working with these people has changed you'. Has Lewis really changed at the end of the play?

If the topic contains a quotation from the text, identify where the quotation is from, and be clear about the context surrounding it. Note the lines on either side of the quotation, and make sure you understand how this fits the overall structure and narrative of the play. Here, Lucy and Lewis are arguing, and it is at the end of this argument that Lewis says 'It's over. I'm shifting out of the house' (p.71). This particular line of Lucy's, then, is important because it is delivered at the height of the conflict between Lucy and Lewis, and foreshadows the final demise of their relationship.

Once you are clear on the meaning of the statement, you need to frame a contention. In the topic above, there are two alternatives: you can agree or disagree with Lucy's statement. (Or you could hover somewhere in between, but this can be much harder to do convincingly.) Often disagreeing with a topic or statement can be more interesting, but also more difficult. In this case, for instance, it would be possible to argue that in keeping with the genre of black comedy, the central character does not change throughout the play. However, there is evidence that Lewis has changed – if only subtly – so in this case it may be easier to agree with Lucy's statement, perhaps qualifying it by adding that the changes in Lewis' character are only small. For the topic above, then, your contention might be that 'working with the patients in the asylum subtly changes Lewis by the end of the play'.

### Sample introduction

Lewis begins *Cosi* as a character who is unsure of himself and has little confidence in his own abilities or in the task he is about to undertake. Nor is he secure in his romantic relationship or primary friendship. Through the process of rehearsing *Cosi Fan Tutte* with the patients in the asylum, Lewis learns to be firmer with his decisions, and to have confidence in his own skills. As a result, Lewis' personal relationships outside the asylum also change. He takes control of his life and makes decisions about his priorities, and although these are small steps towards his future, by the end of the play he has subtly changed.

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#### Body paragraph 1

Identify examples from the beginning of the text which illustrate Lewis' lack of certainty, and rocky relationships:

- Lewis' first line, on entering the theatre, is 'don't know', closely followed by 'I need the money' and 'you said you were going to help me' – indicating his lack of confidence about working in the asylum.
- Although Nick and Lucy accompany Lewis to the theatre, they leave quickly and show no inclination to help him, indicating that their priorities differ from his, and he should not expect their ongoing support.
- When Lewis introduces himself to the patients, he is hesitant and his speech is halting, showing that he is nervous and uncertain.

#### Body paragraph 2

Examine the process of the rehearsals, and how Lewis' behaviour changes both towards the patients, and towards Nick and Lucy. Give examples:

- Lewis confidently stands up to Justin, lying to protect Doug and ensure that the opera can continue; not only is he committed to directing the opera but he later takes on Doug's role.
- When Lucy asks Lewis to decide between her and the opera, Lewis confidently chooses the opera and the patients, and equally confidently confronts her about her affair with Nick.
- Lewis confronts Nick about the affair, and about Nick's attitude towards the patients.

#### Body paragraph 3

Discuss how Lewis' behaviour has changed by the conclusion of the play, noting that these changes have been subtle:

- At the play's conclusion, Lewis is no longer with Lucy.
- Lewis deals confidently with Doug when Doug confronts him after the opera.
- Lewis goes out on a limb, tentatively proposing an extension of the relationship with Julie (even though Julie rejects him)

- Lewis takes charge of his surroundings and at the very end of the play decisively turns out the lights.

### Sample conclusion

Although Lewis does not manifest dramatic changes by the end of the opera, his final strong action – turning out the theatre lights – shows how confident he has become. He has broken up with Lucy and also written off his friendship with Nick, and these subtle changes are the result of his increased confidence, developed in the process of rehearsing the opera with the patients. Lewis has learnt new skills for managing people and for overcoming challenges, and it seems likely that he will be able to apply these skills in his life in the future.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

**'Each patient in *Così* has their own way of escaping reality.' Discuss.**

*Così* is a play that is heavily concerned with illusion and reality. One of the ways it addresses this theme is to show how each patient's mental condition represents a way of escaping an otherwise stressful, upsetting or depressing life. The value this highlights is that it is possible to take control of your own reality and make life more bearable. As Zac says, 'I can't stand real things. If I could put up with reality I wouldn't be in here.' This could equally have been uttered by any of the other patients.

The patients, by living in the asylum, are taking refuge from the elements of reality that disturb them. Instead of facing up to, or enduring, the demands of society, the patients construct new worlds for themselves. They escape the 'reality' of life outside by creating their own realities within the asylum. This behaviour is generalised and shared by the patients. They all use this strategy but each has a specific and personal method for creating situations to escape from everyday life.

Julie, for example, 'can't imagine life without junk' – her drug habit is a way of transforming her existence. Her dependence is at such an extreme level that she can't imagine life without it, can't imagine living in 'reality' and chooses instead the world that drugs can create for her. Taking drugs is, for Julie, like being on 'a rocket to the stars' and it is her way of dealing with a world that is otherwise bland and meaningless, 'like being in limbo'. Julie's parents have committed her to the asylum, and, even though she does not like being there, her confinement gives her an opportunity to escape the reality of what her life on the outside has been. Being in the asylum also gives Julie the opportunity to take part in *Così*, and this becomes her new way of escaping – it gives her 'something' (other than drugs) 'to think about, something to do'.

For Roy, the opera has always been his way of creating a reality that is 'as far removed from this depressing asylum as possible'. The opera is more beautiful, more harmonious, more orderly, and more meaningful

than the 'real' world for Roy, and it is part of a reality he has created for himself – the illusionary childhood he describes to Lewis. This is Roy's escape. The reason he wants to 'aim for the stars' and to convince others to do the same is that somewhere there, in among the 'music of the spheres' that is *Così Fan Tutte*, Roy believes there is a better life. He clings to this dream to avoid accepting the alternative: reality.

For Zac, as for Julie, it is drugs that make life bearable as they allow him to modify his own reality into a numbed, regular, predictable existence. As Julie observes, when Zac is on drugs, 'everything passes like a dream'. This suits him, and, when it comes time for him to design the set, although on a lower dose of medication, he is still keen to escape reality. His set design reflects his dreams and is a minimalist representation of the world – an escape from reality in its own way. Even when Zac eventually leaves the asylum, according to Lewis, he starts several rock bands, suggesting that maybe he is finding a new way to change his reality: instead of drugs, Zac's life is transformed by music. Music (presumably) replaces his heavy doses of medication and helps him escape the reality that he so loathes.

The other patients have similarly developed ways to escape their realities. Doug, on the opposite end of the emotional scale to Zac, wants his life to be as 'high' as possible, and creates his own exhilaration and stimulation, orchestrating situations of extreme danger by setting things alight. Henry has 'invented' (either consciously or subconsciously) the physical inhibition of his paralysed arm, perhaps to provide him with an excuse not to engage with a world that overwhelms and sometimes threatens him. Cherry invents a new reality where her unrequited love for Lewis is actually required – she continues to act as though their relationship is a fact rather than an illusion, despite having received no encouragement from him. Ruth escapes reality by controlling it: by measuring it into numbered steps and regular patterns so that it becomes manageable.

## *Così*

These examples show how each character has their own preferred method for escaping reality and their own way of shaping life so that it becomes more bearable. All these behaviours and habits combine to contribute to the rehearsal and production of the opera – a collective escape from reality. In turn, the opera (the patients' escape from reality) becomes *Così*'s audience's own escape from reality. As we willingly suspend our disbelief for the time it takes to read or watch the play, we, like the patients, escape our own reality in favour of something more amusing, more entertaining, more beautiful and perhaps in some ways even more valuable.